Human, Machine, Play: Donna Haraway in/and Game Studies

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INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I seek to highlight the various ways in which the work of feminist technoscience scholar Donna Haraway has been read and used in game studies discourses, and to contrast this with the ways in which she herself has commented on videogames—our field's object of study. I argue that Haraway's "metaphoric cyborg" (Hayles 1999, 115) has been used mostly in its role as a utopian figure that takes pleasure in transgressing boundaries, rather than as a being that is fully complicit in the militaristic and patriarchal systems of oppression present in cybernetic technologies. The fact that the techno-optimistic aspects of her work are so clearly favored over the pessimistic ones is a sign of game studies' more general tendency to avoid investigating how videogames participate in systems of oppression—a tendency that she herself has explicitly rejected (cf. Haraway and Nakamura 2003).

THE CYBORG IN (FEMINIST) GAME STUDIES

Haraway has been a notable figure in game studies discourses surrounding issues of embodiment and representation. While the "Situated Knowledges" essay ([1989] 1991b) has featured prominently in feminist game scholarship due to its popularity in feminist theory, specifically Haraway's work in the "Cyborg Manifesto" ([1985] 1991a) has proven productive in thinking the embodied relationships between videogame players and their gaming machines. Examples of this include Ted Friedman's early argument that "games offer a singular opportunity to think through what it means to be a cyborg" (1999, 138), Elise Vist's concept of "cyborg games" as videogames that "explicitly disorient normative players" (2015, 56), and Brendan Keogh's "cyborg-player" who "embraces the fact it is always already in part shaped and mediated by the machines with which it integrates" (2018, 182). It is critical to note that many of these theorizations rely mostly on the view of Haraway's cyborg as "an argument for *pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries" (Haraway 1991a, 150; original emphasis) and less on how "a cyborg world is about the final imposition of a grid of control on the planet, […] the final abstraction embodied in a Star Wars apocalypse waged in the name of defence" (154). Keogh somewhat complicates the optimistic tone seen in game studies by emphasizing that the normative "hacker-gamer" is himself a type of cyborg-player (2018, 173). Still, the cyborg overall remains a figure to be celebrated for its supposedly unlimited potentials, rather than a figure to *also* be suspicious of. Some of the supposed partiality and irony of the cyborg seems to have gotten lost in translation.

HARAWAY'S CRITIQUES OF VIDEOGAMES

Haraway herself has also engaged directly with videogames and digital play in her work. The "Cyborg Manifesto," for instance, includes a scathing critique of the videogame medium as "heavily orientated to individual competition and extraterrestrial warfare" and as a key factor in facilitating "the mushrooming of a permanent high-tech military establishment at the cultural and economic expense of most people, but especially of women" (1991a, 168). She continues: "These are the technologies that promise ultimate mobility and perfect exchange—and incidentally enable tourism, that perfect practice of mobility and exchange, to emerge as one of the world's largest single industries" (ibid.). Some have dismissed Haraway's criticisms as "paranoia about compelling, immersive and cybernetic relationships between computer games and their players, coupled with the games' status as commercial media" (Lister et al. [2003] 2009, 287). Yet, this deep skepticism of the medium on feminist and Marxist grounds has been echoed by others who study the videogame medium, offering more substantial evidence and argumentation for taking seriously her accusations (e.g. Hoofd 2019; Jansen 2020; Kocurek 2018).

Moreover, I read Haraway's connection of videogames to tourism as a comment on how the medium enables a specific kind of "identity tourism" (cf. Nakamura 2002); namely that of players identifying partially with the entities they control within the virtual environment. Given the "militarized masculinity" (cf. Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and de Peuter 2003) that permeates digital play, it is easy to see why the tourism practiced in videogames is so often about inhabiting characters whose primary verbs involve physical violence and amoral expropriation. Are the kinds of mobility created by the videogame industry not strikingly similar to those used in military simulations, and do the exchanges facilitated by videogames not heavily skew towards paradigmatic white, Western, and masculine experiences? Can videogames really offer the promised 'ultimate mobility and perfect exchange' if they are so closely linked to the familiar trappings of neoliberal capitalism and the violence of the military-entertainment complex (cf. Lenoir and Caldwell 2018; Wark 2007)? One might conclude that these promises were always going to be impossible to keep, for mobility and exchange in videogames will always be constrained by the material conditions, which shape and are shaped by the medium itself.

Looking towards her more recent work in *Staying with the Trouble* (2016), we see Haraway naming *Never Alone* (Upper One Games 2014) as a "world game," a prime example of "science art worlding for living on a damaged planet" (Haraway 2016, 86). She takes the term "world game" from the eponymous educational simulation about global resource distribution developed in the early 1960s by Buckminster Fuller ("World Game" n.d.), and reframes it as a genre of games developed by Indigenous peoples, as games that take place "inside ongoing indigenous stories" (Haraway 2016, 87). However, her concern for finding new stories for living in the Anthropocene/ Capitalocene/Chthulucene does not make her less critical of the medium. She notes that *Never Alone* "is not a New Age game for universal oneness, a posthumanist solution to epistemological crises, a general model for collaboration, or a way to finesse the Anthropocene with Native Climate Wisdom" (ibid.). There are constraints to what individual games can do in terms of worlding, which are arguably influenced by the medium's historical complicity in maintaining the oppressive status quo (cf. Crogan 2011; Murray 2018). World games should, of course, not be limited to Indigenous worlding perspectives—nor to videogames as such. For Haraway, optimism does not get in the way of necessary criticality on these points (see also Haraway 2019), and game studies should follow suit when engaging with her body of work.

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